



American exceptionalism is a theory where America is identified as a country with a qualitatively different political system compared with other nations

Celebrating America: Insights on American political process

America with an immigrant population

There has been a certain amount of anger among Sri Lankans particularly the Sinhalese community vis-à-vis American policy on human rights. Little is known about the American political process. This article does not therefore seek to discuss human rights but the political process of America.

America is a country with absolute freedoms. The First Amendment to the Constitution clearly demarcates the legislative encroachment on basic rights. The American Constitution prohibits any legislation that would hamper religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc. It allows the citizens to petition the government and seek redress for public grievances.

These rights are well entrenched in the American Constitution and the American Judiciary has upheld many Constitutional issues, over the years, in favour of the public. There is an accumulation of American judicial precedents which are even today being referred to by Superior Courts of other countries and also in political and jurisprudential discussions. The style of governance and the political process of America are very far from the way how the governments function in the world, let alone Sri Lanka.

Ethnic diversity and race relations

The population of America has reached 318 million in 2014 compared to 20 million in Sri Lanka. All Americans are immigrants mostly from European countries such as English, Scottish, Irish, Italian, German, Chinese, Spanish, French and also from African and Asian countries. There are hundreds of ethnic groups thriving in America. These immigrant groups identify their economic success with the slogan 'land of opportunities'.

All ethnic groups have their own political action plans to advance various political agendas. They have roots in the history of immigration and seek equality on par with other ethnic groups. The ethnic diversity and race relations in America are a vast subject on which one could undertake doctoral research.

There are of course differences among various ethnic groups and the idea as to who really is 'a true American' whether whites or the blacks – if whites, then who really are whites and so on and so forth. There are people with roots to Spain and some with roots to Ireland, Scotland and England, etc. They would prefer to distinguish themselves with their original race and birth place.

Since these groups are so powerful they have the financial and other resources to throw about when it comes to choosing a representative who could talk on their behalf in the US Congress. These groups are called 'pressure groups,' 'ethnic lobbies' and 'diaspora lobbies'. These groups have their Political Action Committees (PACs) to garner mass support to certain candidates and to raise funds for the election campaign. Money and media plays a decisive role in election outcomes.

Political lobbying

Since America is a diverse country the process of political lobbying has become an industry where thousands of Americans are employed full time and there are permanent offices in Washington DC with the objective of lobbying US Congress. There are also lobbyists and lobbying firms engaged in lobbying state and local government entities as well. Even foreign governments retain lobbyists to advance their economic and political interests in America; this is to obtain better (1) American aid/foreign assistance or (2) to get more trade quotas (e.g. GSP+) or even (3) to desist certain action/or to take certain action by the American Government.

Lobbying is about influencing public policy and legislation that would favour a particular interest group. The Irish lobby consists of people from Ireland, with permanent residence in America, who are trying to influence American Government policy that would favour Irish interests either in America or in Ireland.

Similarly, the Jewish lobby, which is the most powerful and effective lobbying organisation in America, is actively engaged in advancing the interests of Jewish people in America and

their homeland Israel. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has an office in Washington DC and involves in American foreign policy issues in tandem with Embassy of Israel in Washington DC.

When Saddam Hussain amassed 5,000 battle tanks, the Israel lobby had doubts about his real intentions as Iraq had no territorial disputes that would justify possessing 5,000 battle tanks.

The Arab lobby too is active in Washington DC to advance the Arab cause. The culture and the business of lobbying have grown over the years and has become an essential part of American political process.

Shaping American policy

Being the richest country in the world it has a massive budget and organisations play an important part in shaping American policy. There are major industries such as aviation and aerospace, pharmaceuticals, arms and ammunition, shipping and shipbuilding, media, automobiles, banking and insurance, steel mills, railroads, airlines and other industries.

They too have their lobbying actions in Washington DC for a bigger slice of the government budget and also on legislation that would affect the industry.

If there is a lacuna in American defence acquisitions and policy then the 'defence industry (consists of manufacturers of armaments and ammunition)' would engage the legislators and policymakers and through their hired lobbyists and convince the legislators on various matters and try to get a bigger amount for defence procurement and contracts. The lobbyists would have a field day when the budget is being discussed in the Congress.

The power of organisations in America is a unique phenomenon. They wield considerable influence in shaping domestic and foreign policy. The most important in this lobbying exercise is the role of media. Without the media none of the above can be achieved.

The media sets the agenda and mobilises mass opinion. An adverse media blitz could have a devastating effect on incumbent governments and legislators.

CNN had the audacity to select a title of a certain debate at the end of Bush Jr. Administration as 'a broken government'. The guest at the debate was wife of Dick Cheney, the then Vice President. She questioned the CNN anchor as to the choosing of the title of the debate.

FT Quote

“America is a country with absolute freedoms. The First Amendment to the Constitution clearly demarcates the legislative encroachment on basic rights. The American Constitution prohibits any legislation that would hamper religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc. It allows the citizens to petition the government and seek redress for public grievances. These rights are well entrenched in the American Constitution and the American Judiciary has upheld many Constitutional issues, over the years, in favour of the public”

Organised crime in America and the gun lobby

There are of course areas where true American values have not been percolated. There is a high percentage of gun-related crimes. There have been violent groups and organised crimes that emerged from American experiments such as Ku Klux Klan, drug cartels, gangsters, mafia and cults. These groups are rampant in some parts of America. These issues are amply portrayed in American action movies. However the long arm of the law is being extended to curtail the activities of such organisations.

There is a raging battle between advocates of gun control and on other side the defenders of right to possess a gun for self-defence. The Constitution guarantees such freedom of speech and assembly. The American Government and its actions are bound by the Constitutional limitations. 9/11 incident was an unprecedented terrorist act that would undermine the American values which the founding fathers of the American Constitution would not have dreamt of. There has been a dilution of certain Constitutional safeguards to confront the new threat that shook the true foundation of America.

American dream

The United States is by far the most powerful country in the world with an effective military power that would draw the lines of battles anywhere in the world and no country would dare cross

such lines. The American military and political power is derived from the economic stability which is the cornerstone of the American dream.

The American dream was first coined by James Adams a historian and author of the 'Epic of America'. He says: "That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

The Declaration of Independence says that all men are created equal and that Americans have the inalienable right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This is the cornerstone on which American society is built. The American industrial experiment is beyond anyone's imagination.

Americans deserve the highest admiration for the contribution they made for the advancement of the cause of humanity. Americans have pioneered in advancing human thought through philosophy, art, science, research discoveries in medical and biological sphere, conquered the outer space and derived the privilege of being the first to land on the moon.

American exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is a theory where America is identified as a country with a qualitatively different political system compared with other nations. America was established through a revolution and then created its own unique constitution through a legitimate constitutional assembly followed by a unique political process and ideology.

A French lawyer by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville, who toured all over America and produced his treatise titled 'Democracy in America,' described the American political system as being exceptional.

(This writer is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and public affairs consultant. He is a member of the American Association of Political Consultants)

Resetting Indo-Lanka relations: Irreversible excellence is the goal

The Pathfinder Foundation and Vivekananda International Foundation have recently signed a Memorandum of Intent to cooperate on issues of bilateral interest. The following Release has been issued by the two institutions in Colombo and New Delhi.

WITH a new government about to assume office in India, this is an opportune occasion to consider how Indo-Sri Lankan relations can be reset.

From tensions to irreversible excellence

There can be no denying the fact that the current bilateral relationship between the two countries is less than optimal and marred by irritants. With a view to restoring ties between the two countries to a state of "irreversible excellence", a term coined by a former foreign minister of Sri Lanka, it is imperative that a structured and meaningful dialogue, based on mutual respect and sovereign equality, is put in place as soon as the new Indian government assumes office. This should be complemented by increased and multifaceted contacts at the popular and civilisational levels in order to promote wider dialogue and greater understanding.

Exemplary Indo-Sri Lankan ties would redound to the political and economic benefit of both countries as well as the region as a whole. A peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, enjoying close ties with India, would be a factor of strength for India. Equally, friendly relations with India are a crucial determinant of Sri Lanka's future development prospects, given its proximity, large and growing market, technology and human resources.

New political cycle: Opportunity for rethinking and resetting

The Indo-Lanka relationship is multifaceted and offers considerable scope for significant expansion and rapid improvement in the coming years. The commencement of a new political cycle in India provides an opportunity to cast aside mutual suspicions and apprehensions of each other's motives and work together to lay a firm foundation for closer and mutually beneficial cooperation in many fields, including security, trade, investment, education, health and culture.

The re-setting of Indo-Lanka relations, ex-post the Indian elections would depend on resolving the contentious issues that are currently sources of disharmony. The first of these is post conflict reconciliation in Sri Lanka. This would lay a sound foundation for the development of stable and friendly bilateral ties. It is important that Sri Lanka strengthens and expedites the reconciliation process with political support from all stakeholders, while taking cognisance of its bilateral understandings and commitments.

Priority should be attached to expeditious implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution and the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) related to reconciliation. Action in this direction will create the space for the Indian Government to take a more forthright position in international forums against outside interference in Sri

Lanka through intrusive proposals. Above all, it will facilitate the eradication of ethnic distrust, which currently afflicts the country.

The second important issue relates to security. It is in the interest of neither India nor Sri Lanka for external forces to seek to exploit the situation against the interests of either country. Both countries have to take their share of the blame for the tensions that have arisen in the bilateral relations, but the need now is to move on and ensure that there is closer security coordination between them. Each country is vital to the security of the other, and each must take this into account in its foreign policy and national security strategy.

Addressing the above two issues adequately will open the door to wider cooperation in a number of areas. First of all, it will allow deeper engagement in the field of defence cooperation, where Sri Lanka and India are natural partners. Joint exercises, training, and equipment – all these will gain traction going forward.

Similarly, economic engagement will grow deeper and faster. Regional integration between countries like India and Sri Lanka, which have well-recognised complementarities, will be in their mutual economic interest, and also enable them to stand up to international competition more effectively.

These developments will also help for a settlement of the frequent tensions over fishing in the waters of the Palk Bay. Both countries need to work towards adopting a holistic approach to the sustainable management of fisheries and other marine resources through the establishment of a joint mechanism.

Finally, there are strong civilisational links between India and Sri Lanka, and between the Hindu and Buddhist traditions in each country that have not been put to full use in the past in cementing their ties. Not only will this add another welcome dimension to the multifaceted relations between the two countries; it will also provide mutual support to each other in the face of global currents that could be inimical to their long-term stability.

Short-term adjustments and long-term vision and road map

The two countries should not only address the above issues expeditiously but also work on a 20 – Year Vision and Road Map for taking advantage of the considerable potential that exists for expanding Indo-Lanka economic and business relations. Trade, investment, tourism and energy are all areas where there is scope for substantial growth. Early attention should be paid to: deepening the Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and broadening it to include services and investment; signing mutual recognition agreements; and addressing other non-tariff barriers.

Implementing the above agenda will require sustained attention at the highest level on both sides. It is therefore recommended that a system of annual summits be established between the President of Sri Lanka and the Prime Minister of India to be held alternately in the two countries. In addition, there is need for more frequent, informal contact and communication between the leaders of the two countries, without protocol, so that the emphasis is on implementation of agreements reached and fulfilment of commitments by both parties.